

Ash Wednesday

Today we enter the season of Lent. The word 'Lent' comes from the Anglo-Saxon word for Spring - 'Lenchten', for in the northern hemisphere it is spring and the days are beginning to 'lengthen'. As the winter ice melts, the Church prays for the warmth of the Holy Spirit to enter our cold hearts, to liven them up in preparation for Easter. In the southern hemisphere, the seasons are reversed and we have to adapt the symbolism. After the heat of summer, perhaps we can pray for the grace of God's Spirit to come with the gentle autumn rains to purify and refresh our hearts.

We begin today with a ritual of ashes. The symbolism is obvious. The author of the ancient story of the creation of Adam recognised that we human beings are complex. On the one hand we belong to the fragile, corruptible and mortal reality of nature. God molded the human body (the body of *Adam*) from the dust of the *Adamah*, the red earth. This is the meaning of the ashes. But we are more than dust, for God breathed into this dust his breath, the breath of life, his Spirit. The ashes are what happens when we are consumed by the fire of the Spirit (and for us it is the Spirit of Jesus, the fire of Pentecost). When we die and return to dust, our life-breath returns to God. We pray that God will breathe his life into us again, as he did to Jesus, and draw us into the embrace of eternal life. Now, as we begin our preparation for Holy Week and Easter, we focus on the fragile, sinful, broken part of our being, and we focus on our need for the fire of God's Spirit to reduce to ashes all in us that is not open to life.

We do not begin Lent by focusing negatively on ourselves. We begin where Jesus began: 'The Kingdom of God is at hand, so repent!' We begin with a profound act of faith in the desire of God to pour his Spirit into our hearts, to renew us with the fire of his Spirit. If God's love reduces parts of our lives to ashes, so be it, for it must be necessary for him to renew the face of the earth. When Jesus' heart was broken, life poured out for the healing of the world. Our hearts, too, need to be broken. They need to be purified. In accepting the ashes we are indicating our willingness to undergo whatever God's knows is needed to set our hearts on fire.

In our ordinarily busy and perhaps cluttered lives there is little space for experiencing our deep yearning for communion with God. Fasting has been a traditional way of reminding ourselves to go without certain external pleasures so that we can create some space in which to feel our hunger and thirst for God. In the First Reading the prophet Joel tells us that it is time for us to turn away from sin, to embrace life. He also tells us that the way to do this is to turn to God with all our hearts. The Jews had a ritual of tearing their clothing as a sign of sorrow. Joel declares that it is more important to tear our hearts. He wants us to experience the pain that sin has caused ourselves and others and to turn towards the One for whom we long, the only One who can truly give our hearts peace. If we follow his advice we will find that we will learn to hate the sin that takes us from our heart's desire.

Jesus in the Gospel also invites us not only to fast but also to turn our attention in a special way to the needs of our neighbour and to spend time in prayer. The question we might ask ourselves as Lent begins is: What is God gracing me to change? Where is God's love calling me to grow? We are not the ones who are going to do the purifying. We are too scared to do it, and we haven't the wisdom to do it well. We are branches of the vine that is Jesus and it is God who does the pruning. God loves us with an everlasting love and he will certainly be offering us the

grace today, and throughout Lent, to find the courage to let him purify our hearts.

We have seen new growth come after a forest fire. Let God's love reduce what needs to be burned to ashes such as we wear upon our foreheads today. Out of this purification, only beautiful things will grow. In the Second Reading Paul urges us not to put off responding to the invitation of grace. Now is the right time. God is offering to save us now from sin. Do not sit in silence and watch Jesus walk by. Like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, let us invite him now into our hearts. Let our main resolution for Lent be to make space in our day to be alone with God - giving him this time in order that he may love us with his Spirit and awaken us to the areas which he wants to purify.

We have all been through days when not the slightest breeze can be felt - and yet we look at a poplar tree and we see the leaves quivering. There is a movement of air but too gentle to be otherwise observed. Lent is a time to look gently into our heart, praying that we may pick up the slightest movement of grace - and when grace is calling us to alter our behaviour, that is the area of Lenten resolution. Each day God himself calls each one of us closer to himself. Let us resolve today to listen to his call and to follow him, however painful the journey may feel. Then, when Holy Week comes, we will be ready to walk the way of the cross with Jesus and experience once again and more profoundly the grace of new life in Christ - the grace of Easter.